

Ethics of Digital Peer Support Groups

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What are Digital Support Groups?

- Peer support groups are communities where individuals with shared experiences (such as health challenges, recovery journeys, or life transitions) come together to provide mutual encouragement, understanding, and advice. In digital form, these groups meet through online platforms forums, chat apps, social media, or dedicated support apps.
- **Core Concept:** Unlike professional therapy, peer groups are led by members themselves. The emphasis is on *shared lived experience* rather than clinical expertise.



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Examples of Digital Peer Support Groups

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- **Togetherall** An online mental health community where members anonymously share experiences and receive peer support, moderated by trained professionals to ensure safety.
 - **NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Online Groups** Offers virtual peer-led support groups for people living with mental health conditions and their families. Sessions are often held via Zoom or other platforms.
 - **HeyPeers** A digital platform that connects individuals to a wide range of peer-led support groups, covering topics like addiction recovery, grief, and chronic illness.
 - **Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) Online Groups** Provides structured online peer support meetings for individuals managing depression or bipolar disorder.
 - **Encephalitis International Online Peer Groups** Specialized peer support for people affected by encephalitis, offering community and shared coping strategies.
 - **Community Living Well Peer Support Groups** UK-based online groups that help people with mental health challenges connect and share experiences.
 - **AuDHD UK Online Peer Groups** Focused on neurodivergent individuals (autism and ADHD), providing safe spaces for shared experiences and mutual encouragement.

Why Digital you may ask?

- **Accessibility:** People can join regardless of location or mobility.
- **Flexibility:** Support is available anytime, not limited to scheduled sessions.
- **Variety of formats:** Text chats, video calls, or moderated forums.
- **Community building:** Creates a sense of belonging in a digital age.

Role in Wellbeing: Digital peer support groups often complement professional care by reducing isolation, fostering resilience, and empowering individuals to take an active role in their well-being.

Benefits of Peer-Led Digital Groups

- **Accessibility & inclusivity:** Online groups remove geographical barriers, allowing people to connect across distances and time zones.
- **Shared experience:** Members feel understood by peers who have lived through similar challenges, reducing isolation.
- **Empowerment:** Peer-led spaces encourage self-expression, mutual encouragement, and a sense of agency.
- **Flexibility:** Chats and forums provide ongoing support outside of traditional therapy hours.
- **Community resilience:** Collective problem-solving and emotional support can strengthen coping strategies.



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Risks and Ethical Challenges

- **Misinformation:** Without professional moderation, inaccurate health or well-being advice can spread quickly.
- **Dependency:** Members may rely too heavily on the group for emotional regulation, limiting healthy independence.
- **Blurred roles:** Peer leaders may unintentionally take on quasi-clinical responsibilities, creating confusion about authority and accountability.
- **Privacy concerns:** Digital platforms may expose sensitive information if not properly secured.
- **Unequal dynamics:** Dominant voices can overshadow quieter members, leading to exclusion or pressure.



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Core Ethical Principles

- **Confidentiality:** Respecting members' privacy by not sharing personal details outside the group.
- **Respect:** Valuing diverse perspectives, avoiding judgment, and fostering a supportive tone.
- **Boundaries:** Clarifying the limits of peer support (not professional therapy) and maintaining healthy interpersonal boundaries.
- **Transparency:** Clear guidelines about group purpose, moderation, and data handling.
- **Safety:** Establishing protocols for crisis situations, including referral to professional resources when needed.



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When and How to Signpost to Professional Help?

Purpose: Knowing when peer support is not enough.

Situations that call for referral:

- Crisis or Risk:
- Mentions of suicide, self-harm, or harm to others.
- Signs of abuse or neglect.

Ongoing Distress:

- Persistent symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression) that don't improve.
- Emotional overwhelm beyond peer capacity.

Medical or Clinical Needs:

- Requests for diagnosis or medication advice.
- Physical symptoms or complex trauma discussions.

Safety or Legal Concerns:

- Disclosure of illegal activity or serious safeguarding issues.

Ethical principle: "Know your limits — peers can support, but professionals can treat."



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How to signpost effectively

Goal: Encourage professional help without judgment or pressure.

- Best practices:
- Be empathetic:
“It sounds like you’ve been coping with a lot lately — you don’t have to handle this alone.”
- Normalize help-seeking:
Frame it as a *sign of strength*, not weakness.
- Offer clear options:
 - Mental health helplines
 - University or workplace counseling
 - GP or crisis services
- Maintain peer connection:
Let them know they can stay in the group while also getting professional help.
- Avoid clinical advice:
Never diagnose or prescribe solutions — instead, guide toward experts.

Key message: “Peers listen and care, professionals heal and guide.”



The Supportive Role of Institutions (Without Over-controlling)

Why institutions matter:

They provide *structure, safety, and sustainability* for digital peer support.

- Positive institutional roles:
- Training & Education:
Teach peer leaders about ethics, boundaries, and signposting.
- Safety Protocols:
Provide moderation tools, privacy policies, and crisis response procedures.
- Resource Support:
Offer digital spaces, funding, or partnerships with mental health services.
- Supervision & Backup:
Access to professionals for consultation when difficult issues arise.

Avoiding over-control

The risk of too much oversight:

- May erode trust between peers.
- Can discourage openness if people fear surveillance.
- Reduces the sense of *ownership and empowerment* that makes peer support effective.

Balanced approach:

- Empower, don't manage: Institutions should act as *safety nets*, not *watchdogs*.
- Collaborate with peers: Co-create policies with group members.
- Transparency: Clearly state when professionals might intervene or review content.
- Foster autonomy: Let peers lead discussions and make community decisions safe.
- Ethical balance: "Support the supporters — without silencing their voice."



